DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 096 392 CE 001 920

AUTHOR Carlson, Robert
TITLE Possibilities and Limitation of Cable TV for Adult Education.
PUB DATE 25 Apr 74
NOTE 8p.; Speech presented at the Federal City College Conference on Cable TV (Washington, D. C., April 1974); For related documents, see CE 001 919-922

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; Broadcast Industry; *Cable Television; Commercial Television; *Community Control; Educational Strategies; *Educational Television; Governance; Interinstitutional Cooperation; Minority Groups; Minority Role; Power Structure; *Programing (Broadcast); Regional Cooperation

ABSTRACT

To the extent that educators, local governments, and the public can serve the interests of capitalism and the entrepreneur--and only to that extent--will educators, local governments, and the public have an opportunity for access to privately controlled Cable TV....I would like to encourage educators, instead, to encourage minority groups, municipalities, and other such public interests to struggle for control of the hardware, of the cable systems themselves; to seek to divorce cable TV from the profit motive; to make cable TV a publicly controlled utility that encourages dialogue within and among the various groups that make up the society....Your best hope for continued access to cable TV lies, I think not in asking any conglomerate or Mr. Charlie entrepreneur for free time. Your hope is in community control of a series of compatible local cable systems throughout the United States. (Author/MW)

ED 096392

Possibilities and Limitation of Cable TV for Adult Education

Dr. Robert Carlson,
Associate Professor of Continuing Education
University of Saskatchewan

1. It seems to me that John Niemi, by and large, has a rather enthusiastic view of Cable TV and he may well be right. Cable TV, in and of itself -- free of societal context -- does have tremendous potential. But this enthusiastic vision, I think, is somewhat like an image reflected by the carnival fun-house mirror -- wild, exciting, and unreal.

2. I hope we can roll out a few more mirrors right now that will accurately reflect the society here in the United States -- the society in which Cable TV will operate.

   a. In the first mirror, we see a capitalistic society in which money is the name of the game. All else is secondary.

   b. In the second mirror, we see that those with money and power tend to be effective in their efforts to control the direction of the society.

   c. Assuming that the first two mirrors have offered accurate reflections, a third mirror of reality now rolls into view. To the extent that educators, local governments, and the public can serve the interests of capitalism and the entrepreneur--and only to that extent--will educators, local governments, and the public have an opportunity for access to privately controlled Cable TV.

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(1) Certainly, Broadcast educational TV was acceptable to a number of entrenched commerical interests because, in a situation of scarcity, educators could tie up a local channel with dull, audience - alienating programs and keep out strong competition from appearing on that channel. That's part of the reason an alternative public TV system was allowed to develop. When the programming of public TV eventually began to attract audiences, when PTV raised seniors social questions, then the continued existence of the medium was in doubt until it "improved" its programming.

(2) As long as commercial radio and TV were in their infancy educators, local governments, and the public and had access to these media, at least in the poorer time periods.

(3) Today access to Cable TV can be reasonably easy because there are so many channels available--now! Besides, entrepreneurs are seeking to exhibit apparent commitment to the public in an effort to gain public support for their attempts to control the medium and to fend off increased municipal and non-profit ownership of cable systems. When its no longer economically viable to increase the number of available channels, then efforts will be made to change the regulation requiring increasing numbers of channels. Now, though the short-term interests

of those seeking commercial control of Cable TV coincide with the short-term interests of those seeking access to Cable TV. It's the long-term interests that are at variance.

(4) Some say that now's the time for minority groups and other such interested groups to take advantage of the offers of access by Cable TV companies to provide meaningful educational programs. This, the optimists suggest, might set a better pattern for Cable TV than was set in the broadcast media. They forget that in the early days these media also offered air time more freely that at present.

(5) In my view, producing programs (or, in the jargon, providing software) for showing on privately controlled systems is the wrong emphasis. It offers the entrepreneur an opportunity to use and control the idealism of many people who are here at this conference. You'll get free time, of course, but for now only. There's no certainty that such openness will continue.

(6) I would like to urge educators, instead, to encourage minority groups, municipalities, and other such public interests to struggle for control of the hardware, of the cable systems themselves; to seek to divorce Cable TV from the profit motive; to make Cable TV a publicly controlled utility that encourages dialogue within and among the various groups that make up the society.

(7) Few private cable operators would agree with this position, I fear. Their argument was succinctly put by Irving Kahn, former President of Teleprompter Corporation:

> "I do not think in most instances that municipalities, non-profit organizations or minority groups need, should or should want to 'run' cable systems merely in order to have access to channels of expression. The opportunity is here. Cable TV's profession of channels guarantees it. You don't have to own the cow to enjoy the milk."

(8) In Saskatchewan, we know a good bit about marketing farm products in a capitalistic society and we know full well that we do have to own the cow to get the kind of milk we want at a reasonable price. In establishing Cable TV in Saskatchewan we're trying hard to ensure that non-profit organizations representative of the people will control Cable TV. I don't say this will be a panacea. But I would argue that for minority groups and others to have hope of implementing the dreams reflected on the fun house mirror you're going to control the hardware in order to assure access to the kind of software you want programmed.

(9) There are ways of doing this in the United States. In California, for example, the Watts community has considered a community - controlled corporation operating a cable system under the Mafundi

Institute. You may even be able to borrow funds from the federal government to do something like this in your own community. A California cable operator can offer the Black Panthers and other community groups an entire channel for $1 a year. But if the Black Panthers do their thing effectively their political and economic sanctions will likely be brought against the cable operator who is vulnerable because his primary interest is profit. If the Black community got control of the cable system, however, then you would have the power to resist and the responsibility to further the movement.

(10) Here's the rub, of course. Instead of cursing the guy in charge, you may be become the guy in charge yourself, and power does tend to corrupt. Would you give free time to irresponsible organizations? What's an irresponsible organization? In the South that might mean the Southern Christian Leadship Conference. Here in Washington it might mean the Ku Klux Klan or even a brother with a different point of view. At any rate, you become a gate-keeper and possess decision-making power. But it may be better to chance corruption than to endure continued powerlessness.

(11) And what if you really did do something worthwhile; what if your use of Cable TV really gave a minority community some control over its

destiny and contributed toward a more humane world? What would happen?

Let me quote the words of adult educator John Ohliger of the University of Wisconsin on the results of a successful adult education approach to individual freedom and social justice:

> For years I advanced the listening group approach as a major political move toward individual freedom and social justice only to see it turned by UNESCO and others into a tool of indoctrination in the name of "development." I thought (perhaps naively) the controversies that would arise as people attended to specially prepared radio or TV programs and then discussed them would help them to gain control over their destinies and to work toward a more human world. That didn't happen. Almost by definition if such an activity fails it's because it was becoming successful. If it succeeds in stirring up controversy, effectively agitating thoughts, it is killed off.

My study of public TV here in the United States tends to corroborate the tendency of success in this direction to lead to effective muzzling of the particular medium in question.

(12) How could a non-profit Cable TV operation be muzzled? Easily! The private entrepreneurs are trying to get political support to forbid municipal owership of Cable TV systems. Do you believe that ways could not be found to harass, outlaw, or weaken your control of non-profit cable systems? Already a cabinet committee chaired by Clay Whitehead of the President's Office of Telecommunications Policy has recommend elimination of regulations requiring a free education channel and a local government access channel on each cable system.

(13) Now I believe that Cable TV will indeed prove a bonanza for a minority group. In 1972 Clay Whitehead defined the minority group he wished to see aided by Cable TV -- the conglomerates. He said that the office of Telecommunications Policy believes "that the public's interest can be best served by properly structuring the cable industry in the free enterprise mold." Already the conglomerates have moved in, seeing in Cable TV great opportunity, not so much for helping society but for making profits.

(14) Your best hope for continued access to Cable TV lies, I think, not in asking any conglomerate or Mr. Charlie entrepreneur for free time. Your hope is in community control of a series of compatible local cable systems throughout the United States.

(15) When I speak of community, I'm speaking of cultural community, not necessarily of geographical community. Yet, Cable TV policy is focused upon geography, geographical community. The goals of ethnic groups, on the other hand, tend to focus upon retaining or creating cultural community. What's needed is a broad movement - like approach, not a slicing up of Metropolitan Washington, for example, into convenient geographical cable communities like the Northeast, the Southeast, a section of Baltimore, and so on. That splits the community and destroys indigenous leadership. John Niemir has had some experiences along these lines in Vancouver which I'm sure he'd be willing to discuss. The question that I want to put to John is this: Is Cable TV policy, by its geographical community orientation, antithetical to minority groups and their movements for justice?